

Rahab

The Woman God Took From the Dunghill

Scripture References - Joshua 2:1, 3;6:17-25; Matthew 1:5; Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25

Name Meaning - The first part of Rahab - "Ra," was the name of an Egyptian god. As an Amorite, Rahab belonged to an idolatrous people, and had a name meaning "insolence," "fierceness," or "broad," "spaciousness."

Family Connections - While Rahab's parents, brothers and sisters were alive at the time of her association with the spies Joshua sent out, we are not given any of their names (Joshua 2:13). Some of the ancient Jewish fathers who held her in high reputation reckoned that she was the wife of Joshua himself, but in the royal genealogy of Jesus, Rahab is referred to as being the wife of Salmon, one of the two spies she sheltered. In turn, she became the mother of Boaz, who married Ruth from whose son, Obed, Jesse the father of David came, through whose line Jesus was born (Matthew 1:5, where the asv reads, "Salmon begat Boaz of Rahab" - not Rachab). Salmon was a prince of the house of Judah, and thus, Rahab, the one time heathen harlot, married into one of the leading families of Israel and became an ancestress of our Lord, the other foreign ancestresses being Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba. The gratitude Salmon felt for Rahab ripened into love, and when grace erased her former life of shame he made her his wife. Jerome's comment of the inclusion of the four foreign women in Matthew's genealogy is suggestive - In it none of the holy women are included, only those whom the Scriptures blame, in order that He who came in behalf of sinners, Himself being born of sinners, might destroy the sins of all.

Both Jewish and Christian writers have tried to prove that Rahab was a different woman from the one whom the Bible always speaks of as a "harlot." To them it was abhorrent that such a disreputable person should be included in our Lord's genealogy and by Paul, as a woman of faith, and so her story has been distorted in order to further a scheme of salvation based upon human goodness. Although man's sense of refinement may be shocked, the fact remains that Rahab, Tamar and Bathsheba were sinful women who were purged by God, and had their share in the royal line from which Jesus sprang.

It has been suggested that the word "harlot" can be translated "innkeeper," thus making Rahab the landlady of a wayside tavern. Guesses have been made that she had been a concubine, such as Hagar and Zilpah had been, but that in Jericho she was a reputable woman identified with a respectable business. The Bible, however, makes no attempt to smooth over the unpleasant fact that Rahab had been a harlot. Endeavoring to understand her character, we have –

Her Sin

Three times over Rahab is referred to as "the harlot," and the Hebrew term *zoonah* and the Greek word *porne* have at no time meant anything else but "harlot" - a woman who yields herself indiscriminately to every man approaching her. Rahab indulged in venal wantonness as traveling merchants came her way and were housed in her illfamed abode. Evidently Rahab had her own house and lived apart from her parents and family. Although she never lost her concern for her dear ones, perhaps she was treated as a moral leper. We are told that prostitution was not regarded with the same horror then, as now, but the Bible with one voice speaks of harlotry with moral revulsion and social ostracism.

Rahab's house was built against the town wall with the roof almost level with the ramparts, and with a stairway leading up to a flat roof that appears to be a continuation of the wall. Thus, the people of Jericho knew all about the men who entered and left such a disreputable house. While her name came to be sanctified and ennobled, both Paul and James affix the label to her name, *Rahab the harlot*. *She still carried the evil*, distinguishing name, thus declaring the peculiar grace of the transforming power of God. How Rahab came to forsake her evil career we are not told! Like many a young girl today perhaps she found the restrictions of her respectable home too irk-some. She wanted a freer life, a life of thrill and excitement, away from the drab monotony of the home giving her birth and protection. So, high-spirited and independent she left her parents, set up her own apartment with dire consequences. Frequently women like Rahab are more often sinned against than sinners. Man's lust for the unlawful is responsible for harlotry.

Her Scheme

It was from some of the travelers Rahab entertained and sinned with, that she came to learn the facts of the Exodus of Israel, the miracle of the Red Sea, and the overthrow of Sihon and Og. So, when the two spies from Joshua sought cover in her house, she knew that sooner or later the king of Jericho would get to know of the accommodation she gave them. Here were two men, different from other men who came seeking her favors.

These were men of God, not idolaters, bent on one mission, namely, the overthrow of the enemies of His people, and brilliantly she planned their protection and escape. The flax that she spread on her roof and the scarlet cord she used as a sign indicated that Rahab manufactured linen and also dyed it. If only, like Lydia, she had kept to such an honorable occupation, what a different story would have been hers.

Rahab's skillful scheme succeeded. The two Jewish spies were in desperate straits, seeing the Amorite pursuers were hot on their trail, but Rahab, although her safety and patriotism as an Amorite would be assured if she informed against the spies, decided to hide and preserve them. Seeing their hunted and dreaded look, Rahab assuredly said, "Fear not, I will not betray you nor your leader. Follow me," and taking them up to the flat roof of her house, bade the men cover themselves completely with a pile of flax lying there to dry. Shortly after, when the pursuers had tracked the two spies to Rahab's house, she met them with a plausible excuse that they were there but had left by way of the Eastern Gate. If they doubted her word, they could come in and search her house. But off the pursuers went to catch up with their prey, not knowing that the spies were being befriended by Rahab. As soon as the way was clear, under cover of night, she let the spies down from the window in the wall and, knowing the country, guided the spies in the best way to escape capture.

There are one or two features associated with this clever plan of Rahab which are worthy of notice. First of all, idolater though she had been, with a phase of immorality associated with her idolatrous life, she witnessed to a remarkable understanding of the sovereignty of the true God for she said to the spies - I know that the Lord hath given you the land, and that your terror is fallen upon us.... The Lord, your God he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath (Joshua 2:9-11). Harlot though Rahab had been, intuition from above had been given her that the spies were men of God, the forerunners of His people who were to execute His will, and that to take sides with them was to take sides with God Himself.

Further, there was in Rahab's mind, no matter how faintly understood, a distinct call from God, that she was being singled out from her own idolatrous people to aid the God she had a growing conception of. Her faith of this God who worked great wonders was altogether marvelous and singular. It was such a call that made her willing to sacrifice her own nation - an act which would have been otherwise treasonable. Does not her confession of God's power and purpose, and her service for the spies indicate that she knew the race of which she was part was accursed of God for its crimes and idolatry, and that she wished to be separated from such a doomed people, and identified with the people of God? The declaration of faith given by this Canaanite woman places her in a unique position among the women of the Bible.

Her Sacrifice

When Rahab hid the spies, put those who sought them on a false trail and helped the spies to escape and melt away into the shadows of night, and lay concealed until they could reach Joshua with their report, she took her life in her own hands. We cannot but admire her courage and willingness to risk her own neck. Had those spies been discovered hiding in her house, she would have died at the hands of the king of Jericho. Yet with a calm demeanor, and without the slightest trace of inner agitation, she met the searchers and succeeded in setting them out on a false trail. By her act Rahab was actually betraying her own country, and for such treason certain death would have been hers had she been found out. To hide spies was a crime punishable with death. Seeing the faces of the spies filled with fear, Rahab assured their hearts that she was on their side, and in spite of the sacrifice involved said, "I will not betray you. Follow me!" By military law the spies were likewise liable to instant death because of the threat of war, and Rahab, willing to do all in her power to protect her nation's enemies, faced a like terrible end. How gloriously daring was her faith, and how richly rewarded she was for her willingness to sacrifice her life in a cause she knew to be of God!

Her Sign

As Rahab offered to shelter the spies and aid them in their escape, she received from them the promise that when they returned to her country, along with Joshua and his army, that she and her family would be spared alive. While her sin had possibly estranged her from her loved ones, she was concerned about their safety as well as her own. Rahab wanted the kindness she was showing the spies to be reciprocated, and they assured her that she would be dealt with "kindly and truly." The spies said, "Our life for yours if ye utter not this our business." Then the sign of the scarlet rope - their means of escape - was arranged. "According unto thy words, so be it," said Rahab as she let the spies down, and making fast the scarlet rope, she awaited her own deliverance. That red token at the window was likewise a signal to the outside world that Rahab believed in the ultimate triumph of Jehovah.

Much has been said of Rahab's deceit when confronted by the king of Jericho. She told a lie and Scripture forbids a lie or any "evil doing, that good may come of it" (Romans 3:7, 8). But under the rules of war, Rahab is not to be blamed for her protection of those righteous forces set against the forces of evil. What the Bible commends is not her deception, but the faith which was the mainspring of her conduct. The characteristic feature of the scarlet rope was that it had to be placed outside the window for Joshua and his men to see. Those inside did not see the token of security. As that scarlet line, because of its color and sign of safety, speaks of the sacrificial work of Christ (Hebrews 9:19, 22), the ground of our assurance of salvation is not experience or feelings within, but the token without. Like the Israelites, Rahab and her relatives might not have felt safe within the house, but the same promise prevailed, "When I see the blood, I will pass over you" (Exodus 12:13).

Her Salvation

Jericho was the worst of the cities of the Amorites, thus God commanded Joshua to destroy both the city and the inhabitants. By divine decree, it was to be given over to a perpetual desolation. When Joshua entered the city he set about the execution of the divine command, but respected the promise made to Rahab by the spies. Under the protection of the scarlet line, Rahab and all her kindred were brought out of the house. The spies came to her house, not to indulge in sin with Rahab, but to prepare the way for Joshua to take Jericho. She saved the spies not out of human pity, or because of expediency, but because she knew that they were servants of the Lord. In turn, she was saved. The spies she had hid brought her, and her father, her mother, her brothers, and all that she had out of her doomed house, and made them secure without the camp of Israel (Joshua 6:17-25). Brought out of an accursed city, and from her own sins which were as scarlet, Rahab is a fitting illustration of another miracle of divine grace, namely, the calling forth of His church out of a godless, Gentile world.

Her Status

The threefold reference to Rahab in the New Testament reveals how she became a faithful follower of the Lord. She had been taken from the dunghill and placed among the saints in the genealogy of the Saviour (Matthew 1:5 where Rachab [kjv] and Rahab [asv], are to be identified as the same person). Her remarkable faith was a sanctifying faith leading her to a pure life and honorable career. As the result of her marriage to Salmon, one of the two spies whom she had saved, who "paid back the life he owed her by a love that was honourable and true," Rahab became an ancestress in the royal line from which Jesus came as the Saviour of lost souls. "Poor Rahab, the muddy, the defiled, became the fountainhead of the River of the Water of Life which floweth out of the throne of God and of the Lamb." Her name became sanctified and ennobled, and is worthy of inclusion among many saints. Paul highly commends Rahab for her energetic faith and gives her a place on the illustrious roll of the Old Testament of those who triumphed by faith. "By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she received the spies with peace" (Hebrews 11:31). What a suggestive touch that is, "with peace." There was not only faith in her heart that God would be victorious, but also an assured peace when she hid the spies that her deliverance from destruction would be taken care of. She knew the *rest of faith. In fact, Rahab is the only woman* besides Sarah who is designated as an example of faith in the great cloud of witnesses. What a manifestation of divine grace it is to find the one-time harlot ranked along with saints like Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses and David!

The Apostle James adds to Paul's record about Rahab being justified by faith by saying that she was likewise justified by works (James 2:25), and there is no contradiction between these two aspects for Rahab's courageous deed was but faith in practice. Faith had wrought in her a change of heart and life, and it likewise enabled her to shield the spies as she did in the confidence God would triumph over His enemies. She exemplified her faith by her brave act, and so James quotes Rahab as exemplifying justification by *works evidentially*. As Fausset puts it - Paul's justification by faith alone means a faith, not *dead but* working by love (Galatians 5:6). Again, Rahab's act cannot prove justification by works as such, for she was a woman of *bad character. But as an example of grace, justifying through an operative as opposed to mere verbal faith, none could be* more suitable than the saved "harlot." She believed, so as to act on her belief, what her countrymen disbelieved; and this in the face of every improbability that an unwarlike force would conquer a well armed one, far more numerous. She believed with the heart (Romans 10:9, 10), confessed with the mouth, and acted on her profession at the risk of her life.

In conclusion, what are the lessons to be gathered from the harlot whom God used to fulfill His purpose? First of all, we are reminded by Rahab's change of heart and life, that "His blood can make the vilest clean," and that "His blood avails for me." Was it not a wonderful condescension on the part of the Redeemer when He became manifest in the flesh to take hold of a root so humble in type as poor, despised Rahab to magnify His abounding grace for all sinners? Rahab was well worth saving from her evil life both for her own sake and for the place she had in God's plan.

Other women in Jericho saw no beauty in Rahab that they should desire her company, but through faith she became one of God's heroines, and is included among the harlots entering the kingdom of God before the self-righteous. Rahab's sins had been scarlet, but the scarlet line freeing the spies, and remaining as a token of her safety, typified the red blood of Jesus whereby the worst of sinners can be saved from sin and hell (Matthew 21:31, 32). While the door of mercy stands ajar, the vilest sinner can return and know what it is to be saved and safe.

A further lesson to be gleaned from Rahab the harlot is that of deep concern for the salvation of others. With the shadow of death and destruction over Jericho, Rahab extracted a promise from Joshua's spies not only to spare her, but also all those bound to her by human ties. While her life of sin and shame had estranged her from her family, self was not her sole consideration in her request for safety. She desired all her loved ones to share in the preservation. What a vein of gold that was in such a despised character! When the mighty change took place in Rahab's life, and she was transformed from a whore into a worshiper of Jehovah, we are not told.

As she received and hid the spies, her tribute to God's omnipotence and sure triumph over His foes reveals a spiritual insight God grants to all who believe. And restored to honor and holiness, the redeemed harlot pleads for her parents, and brothers, and sisters. Do we make Rahab's prayer for the salvation of her family, the cry for our own homes? Is ours the same passionate supplication for all of our dear ones that when death strikes they may be found sheltered by the atoning blood of the Redeemer? When at evening the sun goeth down, will our loved ones be as stars in our crown? Rahab is likewise a poetic and symbolic name for Egypt (Psalms 87:4; 89:10; Isaiah 51:9.

The practical lessons to be learned from the history of Hagar have been fittingly summarized by Dr. James Crichton in his article on Hagar in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* - The life and experience of Hagar teach, among other truths, the temptations incident to a new position; the foolishness of hasty action in times of trial and difficulty; the care exercised over the lonely by the all-seeing God; the Divine purpose in the life of everyone, however obscure and friendless; how God works out His gracious purposes by seemingly harsh methods; and the strength, comfort and encouragement that ever accompany the hardest experiences of His children.

It only remains to be said that Paul uses the story of Hagar as an allegory to distinguish law from grace (Galatians 4:21-31). Hagar the bondwoman is contrasted with Sarah the freewoman, and Ishmael "born after the flesh" with Isaac "born through promise"; thence freedom and grace appear as the characteristic qualities of Christianity. Hagar represents the Old Covenant and Sarah the New Covenant which is superior to the Old with its ordinances. Under grace all within the household of faith live by faith, and Sarah represents "the Jerusalem that is above" - "our mother" (rv), which is the free spiritual city to which all children of the promise even now belong (Philippians 3:21).